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## Marianne Moore, Kenneth Burke and the Poetics of Literary Labour

VICTORIA BAZIN

Writing to Morton Zabel in 1932, Marianne Moore praised Zabel's review of Emily Dickinson for *Poetry* magazine but also took the opportunity to remind her addressee that "Emily Dickinson cared about events that mattered to the nation."<sup>1</sup> In his review, Zabel had repeatedly insisted upon Dickinson's "fast seclusion" from her community, locked as she was within an "asylum of the spirit."<sup>2</sup> This emphasis upon "isolation" and "introspection" represented the woman poet as being oddly detached from the "real" and implicitly masculine world of political and social change, a critical strategy Moore would have been all too familiar with, her own work having been repeatedly constructed in terms of aesthetic "purity."<sup>3</sup> Moore's defence of Dickinson as a poet fully engaged with the

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<sup>1</sup> Moore to Zabel, 6 Oct. 1932, Marianne Moore Papers, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia (v:79:29), also in the Morton D. Zabel Papers, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> Morton Zabel, "Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson," *Poetry*, 37 (Jan. 1931), 214, 215, 216.

<sup>3</sup> For readings which interpret Moore's poetry in terms of aesthetic detachment and "purity" see Edwin Seaver, "A Literalist of the Imagination," *The Nation* (Mar. 1925), 297–98; Richard Aldington, "Review of *Observations*," *The Criterion*, 3 (July 1924), 588–94; Louis Gilmore, "Observations," *The Double Dealer*, 7–8 (June, 1925), 200; and

political and social issues of her day is also, implicitly, a reminder to Zabel that women's poetry need not be confined by critical interpretation to the private and feminized sphere of "introspection" but could be related to public affairs of national importance.

Relatively little has been done to relocate Moore's poetry within the discursive frames of the contemporary political culture of the 1930s. The contextual and intertextual network of relations linking cultural production to its historical moment has largely been ignored in favour of a critical formalism. Christanne Miller's study of "the politics of canonized writers" has suggested the importance of relating the political to the poetic, and my own work seeks to contribute to the debate concerning what Marianne DeKoven has called the "politics of modernist form."<sup>4</sup> Thus, in appreciative imitation of Moore's politicization of Dickinson, this article will be concerned with Moore's own response to "events that mattered to the nation," namely the economic depression of the thirties. Focusing on the poetic triptych, "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play" (1932), it becomes clear that Moore was engaged in a defence of the radically reflexive forms of poetic modernism via a pragmatist investment in the aesthetic as the product of non-alienated "leisured" labour or p/leisure. Moore's triptych attempts to deconstruct the gendered binaries of work and play in order to relate art to social praxis. Rhetorically allied to Ralph Waldo Emerson's celebration of linguistic industry and Kenneth Burke's "revolutionary symbolism," the triptych describes the playful, excessive and non-referential poetics of high modernism as the most effective and instrumentally useful resistance to the consumer ethic.<sup>5</sup>

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Matthew Josephson, "Poems: Marianne Moore," *Broom*, 4 (Jan. 1923), 138–39. Seaver describes Moore's poetry as "aristocratic, severe and pure,"; Richard Aldington places Moore on a "prim promontory"; Louis Gilmore refers to her poetry as, "too cool, too cerebral, too objective"; and Josephson describes Moore work in terms of "refinement." For a survey of the critical construction of Marianne Moore see Taffy Martin, "Portrait of a Writing Master: The Myth of Marianne Moore," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 30 (Summer–Fall 1984), 192–209.

<sup>4</sup> Christanne Miller, "Marianne Moore's Black Maternal Hero: A Study in Categorization," *American Literary History*, 14 (Winter 1989), 786–815; Marianne DeKoven, "The Politics of Modernist Form," *New Literary History*, 23 (Summer 1992), 675–690.

<sup>5</sup> At the first American Writers' Congress in April 1935, Kenneth Burke delivered his controversial paper, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America" which argued that literature was capable of stimulating social change via symbolic transformations in the myths structuring social life. Burke described "myths" as making "various ranges and kinds of social cooperation possible." He goes on to assert that "a revolutionary period

As a way of reconstructing the network of intertextual and contextual relations circulating around the triptych, Moore's correspondence with the critic Kenneth Burke will be used to link Moore's poetry to contemporary debates taking place in literary circles concerning the social role of the artist. Particularly suggestive is the extraordinary exchange between Moore and Burke in 1932. Burke's letter to Moore, I will argue, produces a set of terms which reconfigure symbolic language as a form of social action, thereby providing a discursive framework for reconceptualizing Moore's poetry in terms of a poetics of pragmatism or literary labour.

As many critics have noted, Moore's use of quotation and allusion signals a textual instability which ultimately challenges notions of originality. In these terms, it is not Moore's intentions which I aim to uncover through archival material, but rather the textual and discursive tensions peculiar to the historical moment of production. To put this in a slightly different way, when reconstructing the complex set of competing political and critical discourses circulating around poetic modernism in the thirties, the question becomes not one of "sides," fixed and stable political positions, but one of discursive frames. Within these discursive frames, what could the modernist poet say about the relation between poetic language and social change? In fact, as an analysis of the triptych and its corresponding contexts reveals, the poet could and did say a great deal about the political nature of the poetic.

By re-establishing these discursive frames it becomes possible to theorize the grounds for a poetic modernism which is both socially engaged and radically reflexive. This politicized modernism disrupts the conventional view of cultural politics in the thirties as being neatly divided between a left-wing polemicism and a right-wing formalist modernism. In addition, the archival material coupled with a reinterpretation of Moore's triptych explodes the myth of Marianne Moore as a poet immured in aestheticism, detached from the "real" world and, in Randall Jarrell's words, capable of sending postcards only to the nicer animals.<sup>6</sup>

Moore's triptych, I will argue, repeats and reproduces the tensions in American poetic modernism at a moment in history when certain forms

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is one in which the people drop their allegiance to one myth, or symbol, and shift to another in its place." Frederick J. Hoffman, ed., *Perspectives on Modern Literature* (Evanston, Ill. and Elmsford, N.Y.: Row, Peterson and Co. 1962), 181-86.

<sup>6</sup> Randall Jarrell, "Poetry in War and Peace," *Partisan Review*, 12 (Winter 1945), 121.

of cultural production were in danger of appearing irrelevant, even irresponsible. The triptych and its corresponding contexts, reveals the extent to which high modernism was split between a pragmatist desire to be engaged in useful work, a desire to respond to a community in crisis and a high modernist desire to negate the relations of capital via a resistance to the real.

#### POETRY, POLITICS AND GENDER: MARIANNE MOORE IN THE 1930S

In 1935, Ronald J. Latimer, editor, aesthete and well-known Marxist, wrote to Marianne Moore, poet, aesthete and well-known conservative, asking her to explain how poetic form might be related to revolutionary change: "Does your formal control suggest that the mastery of facts is associated with the possibility of more effective action in the historical sphere?"<sup>7</sup> Moore claims to be unsure as to what Latimer means by such a question but, nevertheless, endeavours to produce a coherent response:

I would say that aesthetic expression is, with me at any rate, a kind of transposed and protected doctrine of existence, resting on the attitude to behavior and concept of history; and that those two perhaps are the impulsion underneath it.<sup>8</sup>

In *Modernism: From Left to Right*, Alan Filreis's important study of the cross-fertilization between high modernism and left radicalism in the 1930s, Marianne Moore's response to Latimer is judged to be evidence that, for Moore, "poetry was largely immune to ideological pressure."<sup>9</sup> However, Filreis only cites the first part of Moore's answer, omitting the most suggestive half in which Moore tries to explain the relationship between poetry and history.<sup>10</sup> Moore's poetics, I would argue, is more complex than Filreis's analysis would allow. The use of the term "transpose" is crucial, for it indicates that she was identifying the way in which poetry produces shifts or transformations in language. The poetic is defined as language in action, language in motion rather than as a system of fixed and stable signs. At the same time, poetic language is

<sup>7</sup> Latimer to Moore, Sept. 28 1935, RML (V:35:22).

<sup>8</sup> Moore to Latimer, October 3, 1935, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, ed. Bonnie Costello (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 355.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Filreis, *Modernism From Left to Right: Wallace Stevens, The Thirties and Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122.

<sup>10</sup> Filreis quotes the following from Moore's letter: "I would say that aesthetic expression is, with me at any rate, a kind of transposed and protected doctrine of existence" (p. 22).

clearly, for Moore, embedded in history; it is the "concept of history" which provides the foundations for any poetic utterance. Thus, while Moore's description of poetry as a "protected doctrine" does imply that the aesthetic is an "armored animal" capable of resisting ideological pressure, at the same time, it is also inextricably bound to and engaged with its particular historical moment. The poet, therefore, acknowledges some form of relation between art and the material circumstances of its production, but she also wishes to retain the notion of an aesthetic practice capable of pushing against ideological boundaries.

While the pragmatist turn of poetic modernism becomes evident in Moore's letter to Kenneth Burke in 1932, Moore's correspondence with other poets and critics reveals her preoccupation with the political sphere and her knowledge of contemporary issues on a local, national and international level. It was in the thirties that Moore entered into a series of vigorous debates concerning the relationship between culture and politics. Particularly revealing are her exchanges with Morton Zabel, editor of *Poetry* magazine. In 1933, Moore wrote to Zabel explaining why she continued to support Herbert Hoover despite the apparent popularity of F.D.R. However, Moore's defence of the former president as "one of our great men" is less interesting than her defence of a certain kind of poetic practice:

It would be more to the point if instead of this, I sent you a poem – and if I were ready writer enough to do this, it would be as a patriot and not as a traitor that I spoke. That is to say, the dedication of the piece would be implicit and not a partisan label that made nonsense of Mr Hoover's call for a poem and discredited by its tottering impropriety, any seemingly decent thing I had already produced.<sup>11</sup>

Moore is clearly suggesting that poetry is the appropriate site of political expression rather than polemical editorials in *Poetry* magazine. The poetic strategy would be "implicit" rather than "partisan," meaning not that it would rise above the political realm but that, through the complex verbal density of poetic language, the most sincere political dedications are made.

In order to decode Moore's poetics it becomes necessary to turn to one of her most astute critics, Kenneth Burke. Burke was one of the few critics to recognize Moore's poetic "restraint" as a synonym for a particular kind of linguistic action. Moore had known Burke since her days as editor of *The Dial*; one of her last acts as editor was to award Burke the *Dial* prize in 1929. Though Charles Molesworth's *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* describes a number of conflicts between Burke and Moore concerning

<sup>11</sup> Moore to Zabel, Feb 22 1933, Costello, *Selected Letters*, 299.

editorial policy, Moore recognized and valued Burke's contribution, frequently singling him out for praise.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Burke's letters to Moore reveal the extent to which they shared common aesthetic ground:

And above all, I found it gratifying that you allowed me the title of "precisionist" – for this judgement assures me that I belong at least somewhat in the bin where you belong preeminently.<sup>13</sup>

However, more significantly, in the twenties and thirties Burke was engaged in theorizing poetic form as an instrument of political and social action. Related to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, Burke's theories of poetic language, collected in *Counter-Statement* in 1932, represent an attempt to interpret the complexities of poetic language as a form of opposition to capital.

According to Burke, the function of the literary is plural and heterogeneous, causing the dominant discourse to be dispersed, disorganized and confused. The aim of art is to "throw into confusion the code which underlies commercial enterprise, industrial competition, the "heroism" of economic warfare." This "anti-industrial aesthetic" is a form of rupture:

And so to recapitulate: the aesthetic would seek to discourage the most stimulating values of the practical, would seek – by wit, by fancy, by anathema, by versatility – to throw into confusion the code which underlies commercial enterprise, industrial competition would seek to endanger the basic props of industry.<sup>14</sup>

The important point here is that Burke identifies a symbolic "code" underpinning capitalism which operates to reinforce that system. The value of poetic language is that it is impractical, disruptive, even obstructive; it impedes the communicative process rather than facilitating it. The process of disruptive practical language, what the Russian Formalists were referring to as "byt," is described by Moore in terms of "restraint"; restraint in poetic language is a form of linguistic action which refuses to reflect the material world back to itself.<sup>15</sup> This

<sup>12</sup> Charles Molesworth, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1990), 228. <sup>13</sup> Burke to Moore, 12 Apr. 1957, RML (v:08:22).

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 115.

<sup>15</sup> Burke's critical theory in the early thirties is comparable to Russian Formalist attempts in the twenties to define "literariness" in terms of "ostranenie," or defamiliarization. See Victor Shlovsky, "Art as Technique," in David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), and for an excellent survey of the varieties of Russian Formalism see Peter Steiner, "Three Metaphors of Russian Formalism," *Poetics Today*, 2 (1980–81), 59–116.

"economy" in language disrupts what Burke describes as "the code which underlines commercial enterprise," the symbolic system supporting capital. Thus any shift or, in Moore's terms, any "transposition" effected in language creates a pragmatically useful "confusion" at the discursive level.

The "implicit" strategy, then, is not a form of aesthetic detachment but a means of engaging, at a symbolic level, with contemporary political and social issues. Moore's verbal lexicon, with its repeated emphasis on forms of "restraint," "economy" and even "silence" describes the means and method of political engagement rather than aesthetic retreat. The poetics of "restraint" may be read, therefore, as a masked or disguised resistance to the efficiency of a linguistic system which passively reflects the experience of the "real" rather than disrupting it; the task of poetry, according to both Moore and Burke, is not to mirror what is already there but to change it.

While Moore's poetry cannot be simply collapsed into Burke's highly complex and evolving critical discourse, Burke's attempts to provide a theoretical framework for modernist poetry offer an alternative to new critical assessments of Moore's modernism as a retreat into an aesthetic safe haven. Moreover, the correspondence between the two reveals evidence of a literary discourse operating in the interstices of American modernism between left criticism and new criticism. This is a modernism which anticipates certain kinds of post-structuralist thinking on poetic language; it is a modernism which acknowledges the ways in which language is "revolutionary" when it disrupts meaning at a symbolic level.

#### SITES OF NON-PRODUCTION: POETIC P/LEISURE

The pragmatist turn of poetic modernism becomes evident in the exchange between Moore and Burke in 1932. It is this correspondence which provides the discursive frame for my discussion of Moore's triptych. In fact, Moore's three-part poem may be interpreted as a response to Burke's demand for a redefinition of culture in terms of both labour and leisure. Burke's account of the failure of American capitalism identifies the culture of consumption as the reason for economic expansion and collapse:

The line-up, as I see it, is roughly, this:

The multiplication of labor-saving devices must inevitably tend to save labor. It will depend upon the nature of the economic system whether this result is to be felt as "unemployment" or as "leisure."



The tendency of labor-saving devices to save labor has been offset in part by the creation of "new needs," as advertisers taught people to define "culture" in terms of the maximum of machine-made material acquisitions.

Anyone, approaching the matter from the humanistic standpoint, must condemn this as a dismal definition of the "good life."

But whether one considers it a dismal definition or not, it served for a time to keep people employed (burning up natural resources at a criminal rate, destroying the wealth of the earth in a way which will probably cause subsequent generations to think of us with horror; but this was virtue, since everyone was working).

However, even this could not go on. Why? Because the profits were not distributed evenly enough to permit the people to purchase and destroy commodities as rapidly as these commodities could be produced.

Hence: lowered production. Hence still lower buying power as the result of curtailed labor hours. Hence: still lower production as the result of lower buying power, etc., circularly.<sup>16</sup>

This critique of consumer culture not only attributes the failure of the economy to an unequal distribution of wealth but also blames the discourses of advertising for creating a desire for material goods which is ultimately destructive. The earth's natural resources are plundered because culture circulates around ownership and acquisition and the economy itself, unable to support such frenzied consumption, eventually succeeds only in sustaining a few. Even when capitalism was functioning "at its best" ... we found ourselves in a pretty despicable state of affairs, a situation which *demand*ed an intensely materialistic definition of culture, an adulation of commodity-gourmandizing in order that people might be kept busy producing commodities.<sup>17</sup> Thus the definition of culture for Burke becomes a site of ideological struggle. It is the task of poetry to resist this "materialistic definition" by producing a non-referential playful and reflexive form of language which disrupts the circular logic of capital. This resistance, I will argue, is enacted in Marianne Moore's poetic triptych through the repeated emphasis upon surface, form and play as the means by which to disrupt the logic of the acquisitive ethic. Poetry becomes not a reflection of the material world, but an inversion of the relations of production, a site of non-production.

"Part of a Novel, Part of a Play, Part of a Poem" was published in the same year and, when editing Moore's poetry for *Selected Poems* (1935), T. S. Eliot placed the triptych at the front of the collection recognizing the importance of these poems as a statement of poetic principle. Though Moore kept "The Steeple-Jack" as the opening poem of all her subsequent volumes, she revised it for *Collected Poems* (1952), editing out

<sup>16</sup> Burke to Moore, 1932 RML (v:08:22).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the extensive and excessive catalogues of beasts, birds, flora and fauna. However, my discussion will refer to the first published version of the sequence produced as it was in the historical period under discussion.

In "The Steeple-Jack," the first part of the triptych, the production of "a town like this" rather than a real town, read in the context of Burke's letter to Moore, amounts to an insistence upon forms of non-material production. The reference to Durer echoes an earlier observation by Moore noted in her review of an exhibition of Durer prints in 1928 for *The Dial*:

Durer's "Rhinoceros," Pollajuolo's "Battle of the Nudes," and various concepts by Mantegna and by Leonardo da Vinci, have for us that attraction which originality with precision can exert, and liking is increased perhaps when the concept is primarily an imagined one – in the instance of the rhinoceros, based apparently on a traveller's sketch or description.<sup>18</sup>

Moore declared in a letter to Pound that she would keep her poetic representation of a leopard as spotted because "in old illuminations they are spotted" and besides, she "liked the idea" that they were so.<sup>19</sup> Accuracy is not faithfulness to the object but to an imagined "concept"; in this way, the object can never be fully known or wholly consumed.

The repeated insistence upon the artificial nature of the poetic composition, the waves being "etched," the day "fine," the nets "arranged," the colour deliberately changed for dramatic effect all foreground the act of aesthetic construction. The text itself becomes a dense and solid object, rather like an etching and, rather than reflecting or recording what is observed, it produces ways of seeing. This almost Barthesian emphasis upon artifice and surface, read against the political debates circulating around the uses of poetry in the thirties, suggests that Moore is defending the aesthetic as a site of non-production. The poetic does not generate or produce meanings nor does it represent the "real," but instead it multiplies and reproduces versions of itself. In her criticism as well as her poetry, Moore's preference for what the poet herself calls "brilliance of surface" was interpreted by her contemporaries as a retreat from social and political issues; however, this self-reflexivity operates as a form of opposition, a resistance to the "commodity gourmandizing" of consumer capitalism.<sup>20</sup> These textual pleasures are transgressive in that they disrupt the logic of capital's definition of value.

The refusal to reflect or represent the "real" in language is an act of

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Willis, ed., *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (New York: Viking, 1986), 203.

<sup>19</sup> Moore to Pound, 9 Jan. 1919, Costello, *Selected Letters*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Willis, *Complete Prose*, 54.

"restraint" or "economy," terms Moore used to describe her own poetic performances and those of others she admired.<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, the poetics of restraint is accompanied by a certain linguistic energy described by Moore as "gusto." This is a form of activity in language signalled by a certain textual abundance or excess.<sup>22</sup> In Moore's words: "Imagination implies energy and imagination of the finest type involves an energy which results in order."<sup>23</sup> However, Moore's linguistic "order" remains locked within the poetics of restraint; it is a non-referential "order" which refers back to itself rather than beyond itself. In these terms, the usefulness of poetry is manifest in its deliberate resistance to the "real."

This abundance is registered in the second poem of the triptych, "The Student," where scholarly activity is implicitly linked not only to enlightenment, through the college mottoes, "lux," or "lux et veritas," but also to the luxury of a world which far exceeds the limits of the human imagination. This luxury, though not apparent nor available for redescription, is nevertheless suggested in the density of poetic language. Thus a form of literary labour of "work in language" is suggested through a certain textual abundance; the proliferation of detail, the cataloguing of variety and difference when distinguishing between the "cow/and zebu; lion, tiger; barred and brown/owls."

References to differences are opportunities to name rather than to know as the speaker acknowledges: "But there is more to learn." Here is a pleasure in the language of the gamehunters who use "the fastidious singular" when referring to their quarry. The abundance of signs simply points to an infinity of differences, distinctions and discriminations which will always exceed human attempts to account for them. For the artist, the scientist and the natural historian are all students in that they are always alert to the limitations of their own observations. The abundant nature of this work is repeatedly emphasized in the lists and catalogues of animals the poet provides.

Yet ironically, in the desire to resist capital, in the attempt to value poetic labour as a form of non-production, the aesthetic is fetishized and thereby reabsorbed into the system of capital as commodity. Thus the "reverence" for the "mystery" of the El Greco in the final part of the triptych describes the art object in iconic terms as an emblem of unity,

<sup>21</sup> See Moore's poem "Silence," (1925) and also "The Jerboa," (1932) which admires that creature's ability to survive on very little.

<sup>22</sup> For a particularly suggestive reading of the term "gusto" see Bonnie Costello's *Imaginary Possessions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Willis, *Complete Prose*, 96.

radiance and light which transcends the materialism of the sight-seeing Hobo. But this "reverence," this desire to worship art as a form of pure p/leisure untainted by capital simply serves to return the aesthetic to capital as a commodity; in other words, the art object acquires exchange value via the ideology of aesthetic immunity.

But the resistance to the real and the pursuit of pure p/leisure tells only half the story of Moore's triptych, for the poem attempts to wed the highly reflexive formal extravagance of poetic p/leisure to a pragmatist form of poetic labour. While this is not entirely successful, as the above critique of the fetishization of the aesthetic indicates, it is nevertheless evidence that Moore's triptych was an experiment in fusing modernist form to social praxis. Clearly, the highly reflexive, formally extravagant and textually excessive nature of the triptych must be tempered by a pragmatic work in language which, while not descriptive or prescriptive, nevertheless relates its reflexive forms to social contexts. It is the triptych's investments in literary labour via Ambrose the student and the faltering, marginal hero, that suggest the way in which poetry might fulfil a pragmatically useful function.

#### WORK IN LANGUAGE: LITERARY LABOUR

Returning to Burke's 1932 letter to Moore, it becomes possible to identify how the figurative trope of literary labour becomes central to the triptych's descriptions of symbolic work in language. In the letter, Burke attempts to "forget all the economics" of the current depression in order to remove the debate concerning over-production to the symbolic realm:

If we, for a moment, forget the economics of all this, if we consider this productivity in itself, we see that there is no problem at all. It is not, fundamentally, a "problem" to have a surplus. If there are too few potatoes in the world, that is a "problem." But if there are too many potatoes, that is in itself a cause for rejoicing. Wherefore, if there is something in the economic situation whereby a surplus becomes a "problem," it seems clear to me that something in the economic situation should be removed.<sup>24</sup>

The hallowed Protestant work ethic, endorsed by figures such as Henry Ford, is still operating despite its inappropriateness. Poetry, as negative production, represents a form of labour which should be glorified rather than denigrated according to Burke in the same letter to Moore:

The basic change, as I see it, is the terminological one of instituting the word "leisure" for the word "unemployment," and making whatever other changes

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Burke to Marianne Moore, 1932, RML (V:08:22).

must radiate from this. "Work" would then not be allied to the production of material necessities (which can now be adequately produced by a few hours work per man per week), but with a more intense development of physical and mental capacities in the "esthetic" sense.

But there are no "survivals." You can't admit "Janus-thinking" like that of Henry Ford whose methods naturally make for the curtailing of labor and yet who still glorifies toil with a vocabulary dating from a "productive" situation antedating even the invention of the plow. ... you must glorify "leisure"; which is to say: you must emphasize those aspects of toil which are still as "inefficient" as they ever were. (There is very little speeding-up in the process of learning tennis or Latin; there are no considerable short-cuts for the writing of a poem.<sup>25</sup>

The solution to unemployment appears to be to value aesthetic production over material production, to place greater importance on art, sport and study as profitable forms of activity. In this new leisured economy, the individual must receive from the state a sufficient income to sustain this inefficiency. According to Burke, this form of non-alienated labour returns the subject back to a primary and vital relation to work and involves glorifying "the things which are the most humane in humans."<sup>26</sup>

Burke's solution to the economic crisis appears to be a semantic one involving terminological rather than economic adjustments. A symbolic shift of register would produce the kinds of social transformations necessary to prepare for a post-capitalist "leisured" economy. It is the structures of language, thought and feeling underpinning social and economic relations which need to be revolutionized via symbolic change.

Having recognized the active role that symbolic language plays in shaping social life, Burke goes on to suggest that if the system is dysfunctional then symbolic transformations are capable of disrupting that system and stimulating change. Thus Burke points to the function of poetic language not simply as a means of reaffirming existing discursive frames, but also of enabling change to take place within those frames. Here, the critic has clearly abandoned the first principles of aesthetic autonomy and has begun to theorize literary production in terms of social practice.

Burke's letter to Moore, with its discussions of forms of non-alienated labour, provides the appropriate context for interpreting the triptych's descriptions of unwaged work. The scholarly work of Ambrose the student, the hero's acts of faith and the steeple-jack's efforts to repair the town's "symbol for hope" are all examples of symbolic work in language. This is a form of non-material production which is, nevertheless,

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

instrumentally useful as a means of revising and/or revitalizing the necessary fictions framing community life.

In "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play" work is dramatized through the figure of the steeple-jack, the student and the hero; each has a "part" to play in the unfolding poetic drama. In this series of overlapping, interrelated poems, non-alienated, leisured labour becomes the means by which to restore faith in collective values (The Steeple-Jack); it is central to the formation of a national culture ("The Student"); and it becomes, by the last poem of the sequence, an heroic performance implicitly linked to a Jamesian "will to believe." In other words, the forms of negative production identified as a resistance to the materialism of consumer culture are reconfigured, via the steeple-jack, the student and the hero, as instrumentally useful if employed strategically. A network of tropes and figures develop through the triptych which signal its indebtedness to the pragmatism of Emerson, William James and Kenneth Burke. The hero's ability to see the "inner light" links his "observations" to Emerson's description of himself as a "transparent eyeball" in "Nature" and also to William James's meditations on the inevitability of human blindness. Heroic acts of faith are rhetorically related to Burke's representation of St. Ambrose and, implicitly, to William James's assertion of a "will to believe." The triptych's intertexts, allusions and quotations point to its investment in a pragmatist poetics which links symbolic transformations to social change.

The figure of Ambrose is first sighted in "The Steeple-Jack" sitting on a hillside, looking at the town from a distance. St. Ambrose, an Italian bishop and writer of the fourth century, is also referred to in Kenneth Burke's essay "Psychology and Form" which appeared in *The Dial* in 1924:

St. Ambrose, detailing the habits of God's creatures, and drawing from them moral maxims for the good of mankind, St. Ambrose in his limping natural history rich in scientific inaccuracies that are at the very heart of emotional rightness, St. Ambrose writes "Of night birds, especially the nightingale which hatches her eggs by song; of the owl, the bat and the cock at cock-crow; in what wise these may apply to the guidance of our habits," and in the sheer rightness of that programme there is the truth of art. In introducing this talk of night-birds, after many pages devoted to other of God's creatures, he says, "What now! While we have been talking, you will notice how the birds of night have already started fluttering about you, and, in this same fact of warning us to leave off with our discussion, suggest thereby a further topic"—and this seems to me to contain the best wisdom of which the human frame is capable, an address, a discourse, which can make our material life seem blatant

almost to the point of despair. And when the cock crows, and the thief abandons his traps, and the sun lights up, and we are in every way called back to God by the well-meaning admonition of this bird, here the very blindnesses of religion become the deepest truths of art.<sup>27</sup>

Though Ambrose is a poor natural historian, he draws a certain “truth” out of his observations. This is a truth which functions in opposition to the “material life,” the material life being dependent as it is upon the collection of data, the accumulation of knowledge and facts.<sup>28</sup> St. Ambrose appreciates the animals he observes by allowing their habits to guide his own. He takes his cue from the fluttering night birds; he defers to the judgement of an order beyond his own understanding; the night bird calls Ambrose back to God.

Moore’s Ambrose is a model student because he “knows by heart” like his namesake rather than by accumulating scientific data. It is from his detached perspective that the town has been composed and “arranged,” the boats progress “as if in a groove,” the summer houses are uniformly shaped like “antique sugar bowls.” Ambrose is rather like Wallace Stevens’s “single artificer” in “The Idea of Order at Key West” who masters the sky and portions out the sea.

“A town like this,” a town beside itself, resting as it does upon an unfinished simile, exists as a textual reflection of Ambrose’s desire for unity and order. It is due to his acts of faith in the town as a safe “haven” for a diverse constituency which suggests how Ambrose the student is related to Ambrose the saint. For Moore’s student is willing to put his faith in an order which can only be imagined. Thus, while recognizing that the church spire is “not true” but could be, like the figure of the steeple-jack, “part of a novel,” Ambrose is prepared to act as if it were true.

While everything has a place in this ordered community, it is the figure of the steeple-jack who appears to guarantee safety:

It could not be dangerous to be living  
in a town like this, of simple people,  
who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Psychology and Form”, *The Dial*, 79 (July–December, 1925), 45–46.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Holley discusses at length the relationship between scientific fact and ethical value: “Moore’s poetic appropriation of the languages of science, history and the informative media – the ‘factual’ sources – dissolves the traditional dichotomy between factual and non-factual values of meaning.” Margaret Holley, *The Poetry of Marianne Moore: A Study in Voice and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 97.



while he is gilding the solid-  
pointed star, which on a steeple  
stands for hope.<sup>29</sup>

The steeple-jack, as literary labourer, restores faith in the town's symbol for "hope," in the shared values of the community. Working with the flat, reflective surfaces of precious metal is rather like working with words as the steeple-jack puts gold armour plating on the steeple to protect it from corrosion.<sup>30</sup> The nature of his work, it is implied, though figurative, is central to social life.

This poem appears to be refloating the idea of collective values, perhaps even the idea of "America" as a site of shared beliefs. The Depression was, after all, the first moment in American history when a large proportion of the population questioned the efficiency of the economic system and its attendant ideology. The central trope of the poem, figured through the steeple-jack, is clearly one of restoration; symbolic language repairs the damage done to the discursive frames supporting community life. Yet the steeple-jack's position is undoubtedly precarious; order is only momentarily reclaimed, the contingent nature of cultural signs has already been suggested by the poem's repeated emphasis upon the constructed nature of the town's reality. Collective fictions are, by implication, unstable and subject to the pressures of history. Yet there are no communities which exist outside the imagination, for they are all kept alive through a collective faith in the integrity of their own boundaries, what William James would describe as a "will to believe."<sup>31</sup> While the steeple-jack's work seems, at this point, to reinforce or even police cultural boundaries by restoring already existing symbols for collective "hope," these same symbols not only provide the grounds for social cohesion but also the imaginative grounds for collective action. In Kenneth Burke's terms, symbolic language can serve as a "revolutionary" instrument of social change.

Thus, the artifice of "a town like this" is, in some way, related to the

<sup>29</sup> Marianne Moore, "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play", *Poetry*, 40 (June 1932), 119–28. The triptych is reprinted as "The Steeple-Jack," "The Student" and "The Hero" in Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968). However, Moore revised these poems for publication in *Complete Poems*.

<sup>30</sup> The trope of armor is a familiar one in Moore's later poems such as "His Shield" (1944) and "Armor's Undermining Modesty" (1950).

<sup>31</sup> In "The Will To Believe," James describes the ways in which beliefs and truths are produced by our desire for them: "Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other, – what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up?" William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1987), 9.



real, lived experience of community life, as is evident when one begins to uncover the textual sources of the poem. As a letter to a curious reader reveals, the steeple-jack to which the poem refers:

was a Brooklyn steeple-jack who worked on various high buildings and steeples and had his name on the sidewalk danger sign, warning passersby to keep clear of the ropes and grapnels on the sidewalk. He was repairing the steeple of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, the steeple was finally considered infirm and was replaced by 4 Gothic points.<sup>32</sup>

The church mentioned in this letter was the one Moore attended during her years at 260 Cumberland Street.

In a sense, Moore's poem works backwards; rather than beginning with Brooklyn, the poem begins with the composition, the moment of artifice detached from the historical experience of community. Eventually, via a series of displaced textual fragments it arrives in Brooklyn having first compelled the reader to confront the contrived nature of the fictions framing collective identity. Once the reader has appreciated that all forms of social life are fictively framed, the work of the poet as "single artificer" becomes central to the maintenance of social order. Moreover, in this aestheticized world, symbolic change precedes social and economic change; the latter is impossible without the imaginative impetus of the former.

While Brooklyn is the site of restoration in "The Steeple-Jack," the United States, its cultural development and formation becomes, in "The Student," the rhetorical site of observation. The saint, the scholar and the scientific mind are fused in "The Student," Moore's second poem of her triptych. The process of scholarly learning describes a form of non-alienated labour; the student is an idealized American citizen, one who embodies a subjectivity miraculously free from the social and economic constraints of modern capital. He is a subject in process, always learning and changing and in this sense, he is the literary successor to Emerson's "American Scholar":

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Moore to Barbara Kurtz, *Marianne Moore Newsletter*, 1 (Fall, 1977), 6–7.

<sup>33</sup> Larzer Ziff, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (Middlesex: Penguin Books), 84–85.

Emerson's scholar is the active soul who produces truths via his self-scrutinizing activities. Moore's scholar is equally agile and fully realized in the figure of Audubon. Moore had written an essay for *The Dial* in 1927 which included an appreciation of Audubon for "his faithfulness to the scene."<sup>34</sup> Audubon, like Ambrose, has a faith which is capable of composing and ordering what he sees, transforming "that which creeps into that which is/angelic."<sup>35</sup> Thus acts of observation relayed through the aesthetic are acts of transformation capable of constructing a certain kind of truth and order which is instrumentally useful. This may be described as an ethical act of observation, a form of labour which "glorifies the things most humane in humans."

The scholarly attitude is related to the formation of a national culture in the last part of the poem where the speaker declares: "in this country we've no/cause to boast,/we are as a nation perhaps, undergraduates, not students." The student, as an Emersonian subject in process, is still only imagined rather than realized, suggesting that American culture is still dominated by an all-consuming desire to know and acquire rather than to observe and appreciate. The implicit critique of the culture of capital is accompanied by a faith in the power of scholarship to transform not only individual subjectivity but also national identity.

In contrast to the carefully etched town of "The Steeple-Jack," the graveyard setting of "The Hero" is a neglected, loveless site of chaos and disorder. The weeds of "beanstalk height" suggest Jack's intrepid and fantastic journey to a kingdom of giants, while the "hyperdermic teeth" of the snake is an image of exaggerated, nightmare proportions. This elaborate metaphorical language is as overburdened and self-reflexive as the language of Durer's town, repeatedly reproducing itself in fabulous terms. Yet, while everything had a place in the town, there is "uncertainty" in the graveyard.

Once again, Burke's passage on St. Ambrose haunts the text, but this time as its inverse. St. Ambrose's faith led him to believe that God's creatures could guide "our habits." This harmonious, spiritual bond with God through the observation of his creatures is the source and sustenance of Ambrose's belief. His faith is renewed by these imaginative acts of interpretation. Yet Moore's "hero" is frightened by the unidentified birds flying out "on muffled wings." The scene is decidedly menacing in its

<sup>34</sup> Willis, *Complete Prose*, 178.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion of Moore's appreciation of the work of Audubon see Chris Beyers, "Marianne Moore's and John James Audubon's Frigate Pelican," *Sagetrieb*, 13:3 (Winter 1994), 51-70.

description of the sounds emanating from the night “until the skin creeps.” The figure of the hero “standing and listening where something/ is hiding” offers a marked contrast to Ambrose who is willing to believe in the benevolence of the natural world.

Here is a world which lacks the aesthetic unity and order of a Durer painting; a derelict site suffering from neglect. Acts of heroism are found in those who are “tired but hopeful,” those who have no rational grounds of faith:

hope not being hope  
until all ground for hope has  
vanished<sup>36</sup>

Towards the end of the poem, it becomes apparent that heroic qualities are embodied in the Negro whose observations are rhetorically related to Emerson’s ocular rhetoric. Unlike the “fearless sight-seeing hobo,” “the decorous frock-coated Negro” is not intent upon mastering his environment by accumulating knowledge, facts and data. While the hobo demands to know “what’s this,/what’s that,” the Negro guide has the ability to see “the rock crystal thing” or the “startling El Greco/ brimming with inner light.” The hobo has faith only in what she can see, demanding of the world tangible evidence, seeking factual data to reinforce her subject position; this lack of insight renders her faithless and therefore hopeless.

In contrast to the hobo, the Negro is less secure as a speaking subject, his words are framed by quotation marks, he speaks “as if in a play.” Even his corporeal presence is ill-defined, “standing” as he does, “like a shadow/of the willow.” The contingent and provisional nature of his subject position returns the reader back to the Emersonian scholar as the subject in process, “man thinking.” Moreover, the insecurity of the African American’s subject position in historical and social terms is, of course, no mere accident; American history attests to the ways in which the production of certain “truths” is an ideological means of reinforcing unequal power relations. The “knowledge” of racial superiority, for instance, effectively legitimized the institution of slavery. In these terms, the hobo, incapable of recognizing the limitations of human perception, wilfully riding rough-shod over the mystical and the mysterious, represents the dangers of treating the “other” like a commodity to be consumed.

<sup>36</sup> Marianne Moore, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play” *Poetry*, 40 (June 1932), 119–28.

More explicitly, the critique of the hobo is a cleverly disguised attack upon writers and critics who demystify art in an attempt to give it some kind of definable, utilitarian value. In this desire to reduce the aesthetic to a fully understood, interpretable and "transparent" commodity, literary hoboes inadvertently reinforce the materialism of "gourmandizing" consumer capital. Yet, at the same time, read alongside the letter Burke wrote to Moore, this refusal to acknowledge the inevitable blindness of human perception, this desire to package and commodify the world through factual information, is the direct cultural consequence of consumer capital. The accumulation of data, the production of a singular truth, what William James would call a "teleological unity" reinforces and reproduces the excesses of materialism encouraging an acquisitive, appropriative attitude not only to art but, by extension, to life.<sup>37</sup>

In response to this hoboism, the poem reflects upon the possibility of a non-alienated relation to production. The scholar is compared favourably with that other notoriously frivolous and unproductive cultural figure, the poet. The poet, like the scholar, works on a product which is "never finished"; she fails to produce a commodity which has any exchange-value in the economy, and for this reason her literary labour is coded as a form of leisure – a pass-time or hobby. This marginal status becomes a virtue, suggesting that poetry is, in a sense, valueless as a commodity and therefore of ethical value as a resistance to the materialistic culture. Moreover, the poet, engaged as she is in a form of non-alienated labour, embodies Emerson's idea of scholarship as the means by which to cultivate a non-acquisitive relation to the "other."

This is reinforced in the last poem of the series in which the formerly loveless, hopeless site of neglect has been transformed by the hero's vision, regenerated as a site of "reverence." As Emerson writes in "The American Scholar": "Every heroic act is also decent, and causes the place and the bystanders to shine."<sup>38</sup> Notably, it is the hero's ability to appreciate the El Greco, the "mystery" of the aesthetic in non-materialist terms which signals a resistance to "commodity gourmandizing" capital. The hero's faith in the aesthetic as a source of value, light, inner radiance is an investment in the autonomy and ideological purity of art in the face of capital's ever expanding commodifying power.

Thus, by the end of the triptych, it becomes apparent that this series of poems turns on a pragmatically useful paradox for, on the one hand, the

<sup>37</sup> "Whoever claims absolute teleological unity ... dogmatizes at his own risk." William James, *Pragmatism: A New Way for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1987), 142.

<sup>38</sup> Ziff, *Selected Essays*, 45.

aesthetic is valued as a site of non-production, resistant to the utilitarianism of capital, on the other, the trope of literary labour suggests the ways in which art is instrumentally useful in social terms. This apparent opposition between literary labour and poetic p/leisure reveals the extent to which Marianne Moore was pushing against the boundaries of discursive modernism, attempting to find ways of remaining resistant to “commodity gourmandizing” capital, whilst, at the same time, usefully responding to a community in crisis via symbolic acts of change.

Moore’s triptych, read in the context of the cultural politics of the thirties, cannot, therefore, be interpreted simply as a defence of a formalist aesthetic, nor can it be read as a reflection of Moore’s political position because Moore’s poem effectively deconstructs these critical oppositions. By declaring her right to think of the political in symbolic or poetic terms, Moore effectively collapses the gendered categories separating art from social praxis, poetry from history, leisure from labour. She does this in order to demonstrate the ways in which poetic language is always already implicated in the political and can therefore never be wholly immured in aestheticism. For Moore, myths and symbols structure social life, and thus literary labour becomes central to the maintenance of social order while also functioning as an instrument of political change. In these terms, the triptych aims to produce a symbolic transformation in language which has profound social implications; it collapses the private and public spheres, separating art from social life, thereby reimagining the aesthetic not only as a site of non-alienated leisured labour but also, by implication, as a feminized place of work, a place of productive p/leisure.